

Long Nip Press Belt Made From
Thermoplastic Resin-Impregnated Fibers

5 Field of the Invention

The present invention is directed towards a method for manufacturing a papermaking belt structure out of pre-impregnated tapes. More specifically, the tapes contain a unique 10 thermoplastic resin and a fibrous matrix.

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Background of the Invention

During the papermaking process, a cellulosic fibrous web is formed by depositing a fibrous 15 slurry, that is, an aqueous dispersion of cellulose fibers, onto a moving forming fabric in the forming section of a paper machine. A large amount of water is drained from the slurry through the forming fabric, leaving the cellulosic fibrous web on the 20 surface of the forming fabric.

The newly formed cellulosic fibrous web proceeds from the forming section to a press section, which includes a series of press nips. The 25 cellulosic fibrous web passes through the press nips supported by a press fabric, or, as is often the case, between two such press fabrics. In the press nips, the cellulosic fibrous web is subjected to compressive forces which squeeze water therefrom, and which adhere the cellulosic fibers in the web to 30 one another to turn the cellulosic fibrous web into a paper sheet. The water is accepted by the press

fabric or fabrics and, ideally, does not return to the paper sheet.

The paper sheet finally proceeds to a dryer section, which includes at least one series of 5 rotatable dryer drums or cylinders, which are internally heated by steam. The newly formed paper sheet is directed in a serpentine path sequentially around each in the series of drums by a dryer fabric, which holds the paper sheet closely against 10 the surfaces of the drums. The heated drums reduce the water content of the paper sheet to a desirable level through evaporation.

It should be appreciated that the forming, press and dryer fabrics all take the form of endless 15 loops on the paper machine and function in the manner of conveyors. It should further be appreciated that paper manufacture is a continuous process which proceeds at considerable speeds. That is to say, the fibrous slurry is continuously 20 deposited onto the forming fabric in the forming section, while a newly manufactured paper sheet is continuously wound onto rolls after it exits from the dryer section.

Traditionally, press sections have included a 25 series of nips formed by pairs of adjacent cylindrical press rolls. In recent years, the use of long nip presses has been found to be advantageous over the use of nips formed by pairs of adjacent press rolls. This is because the longer the time a 30 cellulosic fibrous web can be subjected to pressure in the nip, the more water can be removed there, and, consequently, the less water will remain behind

in the web for removal through evaporation in the dryer section.

The present invention relates to long nip presses of the shoe type. In this variety of long 5 nip press, the nip is formed between a cylindrical press roll and an arcuate pressure shoe. The latter has a cylindrically concave surface having a radius of curvature close to that of the cylindrical press roll. When the roll and shoe are brought into close 10 physical proximity to one another, a nip, which can be five to ten times longer in the machine direction than one formed between two press rolls, is formed. This increases the so-called dwell time of the 15 cellulosic fibrous web in the long nip while maintaining an adequate level of pressure per square inch of pressing force. The result of this long nip technology has been a dramatic increase in dewatering of the cellulosic fibrous web in the long 20 nip when compared to conventional press nips on paper machines.

A long nip press of the shoe type requires a special belt, such as that shown in commonly assigned U.S. Pat. No. 5,238,537 to Dutt. This belt is designed to protect the press fabric supporting, 25 carrying and dewatering the cellulosic fibrous web from the accelerated wear that would result from direct, sliding contact over the stationary pressure shoe. Such a belt must be provided with a smooth, impervious surface that rides, or slides, over the 30 stationary shoe on a lubricating film of oil. The belt moves through the nip at roughly the same speed as the press fabric, thereby subjecting the press

fabric to minimal amounts of rubbing against the surface of the belt.

Traditional methods of making a long nip press belt involve the use of yarns and liquid resin 5 systems. In particular, there are three known methods for fabricating a belt using these materials. The first method uses a two-roll system in which an endless woven substrate is coated with a liquid urethane resin. The second method employs a 10 building mandrel upon which reinforcing yarns are laid up on the outside surface of the mandrel in an array essentially 90 degrees to each and then totally encapsulated with liquid urethane resin. The third method is similar to the second with the 15 difference being that the inside surface of a mandrel is used to lay the strands and pour the resin to form the belt.

With all three methods, the yarns used to reinforce the structure are either monofilament or 20 multifilaments and are positioned in the resin to protect their integrity. Due to the relatively large size of the reinforcing yarns and the amount of resin material required to encapsulate the yarns, the caliper of the belt can become prohibitively 25 thick. This is especially so in the case of grooved or blind drilled belts which require additional resin caliper into which the grooves or holes are machined.

The present invention solves this problem by 30 forming a belt using pre-impregnated tape. The tape comprises individual filaments laid side by side in a ribbon like fashion, and encapsulated and

protected with thermoplastic resin (see Figure 1). The use of thermoplastic-impregnated filaments enables rein-forcing elements to be put into a belt structure without substantially increasing the belt 5 caliper. These individual filaments are smaller than yarns that are comprised of bundles of filament, as used in the manufacture of conventional belts. This "prepreg" tape is the building block of the present invention.

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Summary Of The Invention

The present invention is a method for manufacturing a papermaking belt structure by providing tapes, each made of solid thermoplastic 15 resin surrounding a fibrous matrix. One example of the method calls for applying a layer of CD oriented tapes to a mandrel surface, then applying a layer of MD oriented tapes over the CD layer, applying pressure and heat to the mandrel containing the CD 20 and MD layers so to melt the thermoplastic resin and bond/encapsulate the fibrous matrix. The belt structure thus obtained may thereafter be grooved, drilled or otherwise treated as desired.

Alternatively, the above method can be reversed 25 as to the MD/CD order of layering. Also, a layer entirely of resin is preferably applied to the mandrel before applying the MD and CD tapes. In addition, one or more resin layers can be applied 30 after, or in between, the MD and CD tapes. This resin layer can be rubber in one or all layers as well.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Thus by the present invention, its objects and advantages will be realized, the description of which should be taken in conjunction with the 5 drawings wherein:

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of a fiber reinforced thermoplastic tape used in the manufacture of the belt according to the present invention;

10 Figure 2 is a diagram of a building mandrel used in the production of the inventive belt;

Figure 3 is an illustration of the mandrel of Figure 2 with the tape of Figure 1 applied thereto in a cross machine direction; and

15 Figure 4 is a representation showing the mandrel of Figure 3 with additional tape applied thereto in the machine direction.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

20 Figure 1 illustrates a fiber reinforced thermoplastic tape 10 used in manufacturing the belt of the present invention. The tape 10 comprises a unique solid thermoplastic elastomeric resin 12 containing irradiation activated cross linking 25 compounds. The resin 12 surrounds a fibrous matrix 14 that can take on a variety of forms. Examples of the matrix material 14 include continuous fiber filaments, woven tapes, and knitted tapes with continuous reinforcing threads. However, continuous 30 fiber filaments 14, as shown in Figure 1, offer the best reinforcement, as they do not rely on resin bonding to obtain their strength. That is, if for

some reason the resin 12 loses its integrity, the filaments 14 still provide reinforcement.

To form the tape 10, any one of the aforementioned matrix materials 14 is impregnated, 5 for example, via a heated die, with the unique thermoplastic elastomeric resin 12. Upon completion, the "prepreg" 10, as it is called, is in solid form and of a fixed cross section. As shown in Figures 10 2-4, this prepreg 10, is used to lay an array of both MD and CD oriented tapes 22, 24 onto a building mandrel 16. The mandrel 16 containing the MD and CD array of prepreg tapes 22, 24 is then wrapped with a woven tape or shrinkable film (not shown) to supply pressure during a subsequent heating process. This 15 heating process re-liquefies the thermoplastic resin 12 and creates a homogeneous resin encapsulation of all the MD and CD yarns 14. Once the mandrel 16 containing the now homogeneous resin and yarn reinforcement is cooled, any imperfections such as 20 air bubbles may be repaired by re-melting the affected area with a hot tool. Once any imperfections are repaired, the resin 12 can be treated in an appropriate manner to cross-link the resin 12 into a thermoset material. The surface of 25 the belt structure thus obtained may then be machined to create lands and grooves of a desired caliper and spacing, or blind drilled holes or other methods to create desired surface voids.

One example of the aforementioned method of 30 manufacturing the belt will now be described in further detail. Initially, as shown in Figure 3, the tapes 22 are laid on the entire mandrel surface

first in the CD direction, and held in place by the clamping rings 18, 20 at each shoulder of the mandrel 16. In this connection, care is taken to ensure that adjacent tapes 22 abut each other 5 without void areas therebetween. Once the CD prepreg tapes 22 cover the entire surface of the mandrel 16, the MD tapes 24 are then spiral wound over the CD tapes 22, again making sure that adjacent spirals abut each other as shown in Figure 10 4. Note that this MD tape 24 is fastened to the clamping rings 18, 20 at the beginning and at the end of the wind.

It should be understood that the MD/CD order of layering can be reversed. In addition, a layer 15 entirely of resin is preferably applied to the mandrel before applying the tapes 22, 24. Note further that, in the case greater belt caliper is required to create groove or blind drilled void volume, a tape made of 100% thermoplastic resin (not 20 shown) can be applied prior to, or after, the prepreg MD and CD tapes 22, 24 are in place. This resin layer can also be applied between the MD/CD layers but not fully cured. Up to several layers of this non-fiber reinforced thermoplastic resin may be 25 applied if necessary. The resin layer can be rubber in one or all layers as well.

Once the mandrel 16 is "dressed" with the prepreg tape 22, 24, it is ready to be heat treated so to melt the thermoplastic resin 12 and bond the 30 entire matrix. Prior to heat treating however, the dressed mandrel is wrapped with a shrinkable film that holds and supplies pressure to all the

components. The wrapped mandrel (not shown) is then placed in an autoclave or a similar heating chamber. However, induction heating, infrared, hot air or other suitable means for the purpose may also be 5 used to melt-flow the resin 12 without immersing the entire mandrel in a hot atmosphere. Note that the heat required to make the resin 12 flow is determined by the type of resin 12 used to make the prepreg 10.

10 Once the resin 12 has been sufficiently heated to promote resin flow, the belt can be cooled to solidify the resin 12. Subsequently, due to the thermoplastic nature of the resin 12, defects such as small voids in resin bond areas can be repaired 15 via heat and additional resin (not shown). The belt structure thus obtained is then ready to have its surface ground to a uniform caliper, using, for example, conventional grinding equipment. Grooves or blind drilled holes may be formed thereafter if 20 desired.

Additionally, it is noted that there is a family of thermosetting resins that when subjected to temperatures above their melting point will cross link and become thermoset. This type of resin can 25 also be used in the fabrication of the belt and is the preferred material.

There are key differences between the present invention and that disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,507,899 (Yamauchi). For example, Yamauchi's tape 30 is wound onto a mandrel while still in the liquid form, and is wound only in the machine direction; there is no CD component. The disadvantage is that

if the fiber-to-resin bond breaks down, the reinforcement is lost in all directions. The present invention eliminates this disadvantage by using a tape 10 that is in a solid state (dry) and 5 placed in both MD and CD directions to maximize stability. Further, the continuous filaments 14 as shown in Figure 1 offer superior reinforcement as they do not rely on resin bonding to obtain their strength. That is, if for any reason the resin 10 loses its integrity, the filaments 14 still provide reinforcement.

Although a preferred embodiment has been disclosed and described in detail herein, its scope should not be limited thereby; rather its scope 15 should be determined by that of the appended claims. For example, the belt of the present invention can also be used for shoe press belts used in shoe calenders or other applications which will be apparent to those skilled in the art.